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ABSTRACT

An experiment combining listening comprehension training and error analysis was conducted with students at the English Language Institute, Queens College, the City University of New York. The purpose of the study was to investigate how to take learners who were primarily dependent on perceptive skills for comprehension and widen their comprehension systems. The students were given the opportunity to formulate and test hypotheses on oral texts and to discover the strategies they could have been using. The goal of the experiment was to prepare the learners for the test of English as a foreign language (TOEFL) examination, to prepare them for meeting the communicative demands of the real world, and to investigate the possibilities of rethinking and reapplying the principle of autonomous learning in a framework of institutional constraints. Learners were presented with a variety of texts from radio talk-shows, news broadcasts, radio commercials, comedy sketches, and semi-authentic recordings of native speakers carrying out certain speech acts. The predominant activities were detailed listening and completing partial transcripts of oral texts. Papers were collected and errors were listed and classified. Follow-up sessions provided opportunity for feedback and discussion of learners' hypotheses, along with the corrected versions. Examples of the activity are included. (AMH)

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LISTENING COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES AND AUTONOMY : WHY ERROR ANALYSIS ?

Carolyn HENNER-STANCHINA

RESUME

Au fur et à mesure que les connaissances sur l'acquisition du langage progressaient, le centre d'intérêt des recherches dans le domaine de l'apprentissage auto-dirigé s'est progressivement déplacé : l'étude des facteurs extérieurs, analysés dans les premières expériences (temps, lieu, contenu du programme d'apprentissage, techniques d'apprentissage) a laissé la place à celle des facteurs plus intrinsèques, tels que les procédés interprétatifs et l'acquisition individuelle du langage. Dans la recherche présentée dans cet article, ce changement résulte également de l'imposition de contraintes institutionnelles.

L'auteur retrace brièvement les étapes de l'évolution d'une stratégie spécifique d'apprentissage auto-dirigé et explique comment un enseignant, en utilisant uniquement des documents et des situations authentiques, peut aider les apprenants à prendre une plus grande conscience d'eux-mêmes en tant qu'utilisateurs de la langue et apprenants de cette langue. L'exemple de l'entrainement à la compréhension orale et à l'analyse des erreurs permet de montrer comment des apprenants peuvent être amenés à développer leurs propres stratégies de compensation tout en diminuant leur dépendance à l'égard des enseignants et de l'enseignement.

(Teacher) : " The problem is you're living all by yourself now... " (empathetic)

(Student) : " but I'm not selfish... " (aggressive, defensive)

(Telephone operator) : " Do you live in Bayside, Edgemere or the Rockaways ? "

(Student) : " Yes. "

There are cases where it is obvious that second language learners have failed to understand what was being said to them. When such cases of misunderstanding occur in natural discourse, there is at least the possibility that they will be picked up by the sensitive language teacher or native speaker, and rectified.

However, much of the listening comprehension in which college-bound or enrolled foreign students are engaged does not afford them the luxury of immediate feedback from teachers and native speakers : listening to the radio, attending ESL classes, attending regular university lectures, etc. They are likely to be left alone to grapple with the streams of speech by which they are bombarded daily, and of which they must somehow make sense.

Faced with this challenge, many students will develop avoidance strategies - admittedly not listening to the radio because it is too difficult to understand, and literally fleeing native speakers (even at the risk of creating embarrassing situations) for fear of not being able to understand what is said. (Avoidance is carried into the classroom where students asked to complete a partial transcript of a tape will simply leave the blanks untouched.) Others, who do expose themselves to the challenge, inevitably experience listening blocks - losing concentration as soon as the slightest detail escapes them. Despite our attempts to demonstrate the logic, reality and practicality of " global comprehension ", learners are usually not satisfied until they have deciphered everything, and have seen for themselves which information was absolutely necessary for comprehension and which wasn't.

These learners depend entirely on their perceptive skills (descriminating and segmenting sounds) for comprehension, and when perception fails them, all fails. They are unable to make use of any of the contextual clues available to them.

Teachers tend to reinforce this behavior by " teaching " listening comprehension as if it were a finite subject matter that one could eventually master through dedication, close attention to vocabulary-building and extra listening practice to improve hearing acuity. This attitude is reminiscent of the comic scene of the native who speaks louder and louder in a desperate attempt to make

himself understood by a foreigner, or of the ludicrous claims of charlatanistic commercial language course producers that keeping a cassette player under one's pillow and casually listening to a particular language being spoken will ensure quick, easy acquisition of that language.

While a great deal remains to be discovered about language learning, we do know, or should, that there is no easy, passive path to language learning in general, nor to understanding spoken language in general.

Listening comprehension is *not* the receptive, passive skill it was once thought to be. On the contrary, it is an active " construction process " whereby " listeners take in the raw speech, isolate and identify the constituents of surface structure, and build propositions appropriate to each. As they build each proposition, they add it to the interpretation they have formed of the sentence so far, and the propositions taken together constitute the final interpretation. In this process listeners normally hold the constituents verbatim in working memory until they have passed a sentence boundary, and then they eliminate them and retain only the finished interpretation. " (Clark and Clark, 1977)

As an explanation of exactly how this is done " It is assumed that listeners have a number of strategies by which they infer what the constituents are and what they are meant to convey. " The two major strategies Clark and Clark discuss are the syntactic and the semantic. " In the syntactic approach, the strategies use function words, suffixes, prefixes and grammatical categories of content words as clues to the identity of the constituents, and other strategies build propositions from these constituents. In the semantic approach, the strategies take advantage of the fact that sentences refer to real objects, states and events, and fit the ongoing discourse... Listeners probably rely on some flexible combination of these strategies ", although it is not known whether these two strategies operate simultaneously or one before the other. Clark and Clark suggest that, " Generally, these strategies begin with propositions that make sense in context and then check for surface constituents that express these propositions. "

However, as has already been mentioned, it would seem that where non-natives are concerned, listeners more often than not wait, " collecting phonological information in working memory, and then attempt an analysis " (Clark and Clark, ibid.) rather than anticipating what is to come. In sum, their system of comprehension is a limited one. This can perhaps be attributed to the kind of listening learners are so often asked to do in traditional classrooms or on traditional grammar-focussed examinations which present artificial, decontextualized bits of language, devoid of any communicative dimension and spoken in sterilized accents to boot. This kind of conditioning of language learners perverts their ability to deal with authentic listening.

The problem addressed in this study, then, was how to take learners who were primarily dependent on perceptive skills for comprehension and widen their comprehension systems - giving them the opportunity to formulate and test hypotheses on oral texts, while revealing to them the strategies they could have been taking advantage of to make sense of the mumbo-jumbo of spoken English.

THE LEARNERS :

The learners involved in this experiment were students at the English Language Institute, Queens College, the City University of New York. They varied in age, nationality and professional aspiration. They had all come to New York City to enter undergraduate or graduate programs. The requirement for entrance to any city, state, or private American university with respectable standards is a score of 500 on the TOEFL examination[1]. The students are also eligible for admission to Queens College if they can prove language proficiency by passing the final examination administered by the English Language Institute itself. Both of these are traditional examinations with the characteristics cited earlier. This poses a pedagogical contradiction to the teacher who is aware that this kind of language has no counterpart in authentic communication. Test language is test language, not real language, just as test-taking ability is not functional, communicative ability.

And yet the conscientious teacher must somehow incorporate these two opposing aspects of language acquisition into the curriculum, whatever the risks of resulting burnout or schizophrenia, occupational hazards suffered by more and more teachers. These types of tests are well anchored in the university system, and are staunchly defended as practical selective tools for our purposes. The purveyors of these examinations argue that no examination can be perfect, and that these uphold our academic standards as well as any. So teachers must continue to observe, in silence, the devastating effects that poor test results can have on learners' lives - learners who are all too often apparently fluent, interactively competent, but lacking in surface knowledge of the language, and therefore, unable to pass these examinations.

The search for linguistic perfection in foreign students seems almost an absurdity in a city like New York where :

— native speaker levels of " correct " English usage have dropped considerably,

— many of the teachers are foreign-born themselves. Ironically, one can become a teacher without having been subjected to any test of language proficiency, yet one cannot become a student by the same rules.

1 TOEFL - Princeton, New Jersey.

But then, the purpose of this paper is not to discuss testing, however difficult it may be to avoid such a discussion, and to suppress the urge to propose alternative examinations that would reconcile the need for selection and the realities of communication.

Coming back to the learners, then, this experiment was carried out with levels 5 and 6 - high intermediate to advanced learners who had already had previous training in English either in their countries or in the United States.

GOAL OF THE EXPERIMENT :

The goal of this experiment was threefold :

1. To prepare the learners for their exams.
2. To prepare the learners for meeting the communicative demands of the real world.
3. To investigate the possibilities of preserving, re-thinking and re-applying the principle of autonomous learning in a new framework where the institutional constraints are such that nothing in the *external* experience of the learner can be changed. Previous articles in the *Mélanges Pédagogiques* [2] have described set-ups which were either alternatives to the classroom or complementary facets of classroom work which in turn had repercussions on the work one was able to do with learners in the classroom. Here the case is different. The classroom is the only meeting-place available to students and teacher.

A classroom may comprise as many as twenty students who can rarely be successfully broken up into listening work groups for lack of extra space in the college. There is a language lab but the classical audio-active comparative machines with a central control are useless for our purposes. There are only four cassette players available, meaning that students must wait in line to earn the right to use one. Not all students can afford to have their own cassette players at home. Again, the immutable realities of an inflexible institution.

[2] *Mélanges Pédagogiques :*

CEMBALO M., GREMMO M.J. (1974) : « Autonomie de l'Apprentissage : réalités et perspectives. »

ABÉ D., HENNER STANCHINA C., SMITH P. (1975) : " New Experiments in Self-Directed Learning. "

HENNER STANCHINA C. (1976) : " Two Years of Autonomy : Practice and Outlook. "

MOULDEN H. (1978) : " Entending Self-Directed Learning of English in a Engineering College. "

With the resignation that the institution could not, would not change the external learning conditions for its participants came the realization that in spite of this, and in fact, because of this obstacle, the focus of autonomy had to be turned inward, had to be seen from a more *internal* perspective. Increasing learner awareness of the learning process thus meant revealing to them the complexities of the " construction process " which operates during listening, and the different strategies potentially available to them. The emphasis was on the actual individual processing of language data with identical input for all learners ; the problem — how to go about revealing and developing these processing strategies to the learners in the classroom.

ERROR ANALYSIS JUSTIFIED :

While it is true that communicative approaches to language teaching/learning have made techniques such as strict error correction unpalatable (at least to the author) when dealing with skills such as oral expression, this technique was nevertheless retained as a means of revealing the learners' abilities to mobilize comprehension strategies for the disambiguation of authentic oral texts, while at the same time revealing their " approximative systems " (Pit Corder, 1978) and using the information thus obtained as a basis for remedial work.

Error analysis was proposed, then, as a *sensitizing technique* — a means of showing learners how they were processing language data and how they could improve their processing skills. It was used *not* as suggested in early discussions of error analysis, for the purpose of discovering any " natural sequence of elaboration of the approximative system of the second language learner " (Corder, 1978), nor of providing clues for ordering material in the design of syllabuses, but rather as a methodological tool to aid comprehension by revealing malfunctions in the construction process.

METHOD AND PROCEDURE :

Learners were presented with a variety of authentic oral texts and accompanying exercises. The texts consisted of radio talk-show interviews and discussions presenting different regional accents and a wide range of topics, news broadcasts and commentaries, radio commercials, comedy sketches, and semi-authentic recordings of native speakers carrying out certain speech acts. The activities included information searches, prediction exercises and note-taking [3].

[3] The inaccessibility for ESL teachers of recorded college lectures made this activity a rare one, other oral texts not exhibiting the same discursive features as lectures prepared for students.

The predominant activity, however, was detailed listening and completing partial transcripts of oral texts.

Each tape was played once for global listening comprehension. Then short segments were played repeatedly, and students were asked to transcribe what they heard without conferring with one another. Having completed the actual listening task, learners were given ample time to look over their papers in search of items they might have jotted down in the heat of transcription, but which they were later capable of recognizing as impossible and correcting. This allowed for non-linear comprehension : delayed interpretation, or re-evaluation and modification of their initial interpretations once the entire text had been heard. It gave them extra time to examine their own hypotheses and compute new interpretations. Papers were then collected, and errors listed and classified by the teacher as to their origin :

perceptive errors

syntactic errors

semantic errors (including pragmatic errors).

Some typical results of this exercise are provided below : (For the sake of simplicity, these results are merely listed, not categorized.)

TEXT I : ON CAFETERIA FOOD :

ORIGINAL TEXT	LEARNER HYPOTHESES
— " That's why I'm eating peanut butter and jelly, 'cause it's safer... "	— " That's why meating peanut butter and jelly 'cause safe... "
— " 48 were selected for the regular menu. "	— " 48 west selector radio menu " / 48 was selected for the regal menu. "
— " Despite the appearance of a new and exciting menu... "	— " Despite of parents / it might be appearance / is maybe parents of a new and exciting menu / disappoint parents of a new and exciting menu. "
— " It's a good idea but I don't think it tastes like home cooking. "	— " I got an idea to but I think I would taste like home cooking. "
— " I am second year student in the dorm, so I'm really tired of the whole mess. "	— " I'm a second year student so I'm retired at home now. "

TEXT II : ADVICE ON MAJORING IN COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY :

— " Good evening, Mr. Meitzer. It's a pleasure to speak to you. "	— " Il pleasure to speak with you. " " It's a please to speak to you. " / " It's a place to sit. " / " I am very pleasant to call you. "
— " I have one small problem. "	— " I have one more problem. "
— " What is your small problem ? "	— " What is your more problem ? "
— " My final grade was C. "	— " My final credit was C- " / " My father plans to see me now " / " My father is a seaminon. "
— " My question is that since I am having some problems with my math, would I be better off going into some other major ? "	— " My question is that since I married " / " since I'm having no problems with my math... "
— " You have to have a natural instinct for math. If you don't have it, you'll be unhappy in the field. "	— " You can to have a naturally safe for math. If you don't have it, you would be unhappy in the few. "

TEXT III : REQUEST TO HAVE A LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION TYPED ON SHORT NOTICE :

— " Excuse me, Mr. Smith. Can you help me ? "	— " Excuse me, Mr. Smith. May you help me ? " / ... " do you help me ? "
— " I need a letter of recommendation typed up for this afternoon. "	— " I need a letter of recommendation to type it up for this afternoon. "
— " If you want something typed up... "	— " If you want something to type. "
— " I have absolutely no time to do it now. I have other work to do... "	— " I really have no any time to do it now " / " I haven't no time to do it now " / " I have little work to do " / " I have a little work to do. "

The follow-up sessions provided explicit feedback on the learners' hypotheses. The tape was played again and the corrected version written on the board. While this final version was being collectively elaborated, the semantic errors (and perceptive, if any) were examined. Students and teacher discussed why certain hypotheses were impossible :

EXAMPLE : (from request for letter of recommendation)

" I have no time to do it now. I have little work to do. " Considering this sequence of speech acts as Refusal + Excuse, this hypothesis is impossible since the excuse here does NOT support the refusal.

EXAMPLE : (from advice in majoring in computer technology)

" It's a place to sit. " This is not an acceptable alternative to the offer, " have a seat ", and is impossible within the context of this telephone conversation.

Other hypotheses, although incorrect vis-a-vis original text constituted better guesses :

EXAMPLE : (from " cafeteria food ")

" It's no longer the impersonal organization we had in the past ", for " It's no longer the impersonalization we had in the past. "

The last part of the activity consisted of analyzing and correcting the grammatical errors produced, preferably with learners working cooperatively in small groups.

COMMENTS ON THE TECHNIQUE :

It must be stressed that the combination of listening comprehension and error analysis does not, in itself, simulate a true language-processing situation, if for no other reason than the time constraints of real listening are absent here. This technique is to be viewed as a learning activity which, by rendering observable the hypotheses being tested by the learners, will train them to develop listening comprehension strategies and allow them to restructure their existing knowledge of the language. In this way, the technique is designed to prepare them to cope with the tasks facing them.

This technique takes into account the learner's condition as a learner, who, by definition, must somehow manage to function with an impaired language system. By revealing the very nature of listening comprehension to the learners - making them aware of the different strategies (perceptive, syntactic, semantic/pragmatic) normally activated during listening, and emphasizing that comprehen-

sion is indeed a " construction process " it is hoped that they will begin to call upon these strategies simultaneously, using the strengths of one to *compensate* for the weaknesses of another, in order to counteract the imperfection of their language systems.

The concept of a *compensation strategy* [4] was not unfamiliar to these students, who had already seen how compensation strategies could operate in interactive situations. What remained to be done then was simply to shift the focus of compensation to the " listening self ", outside of any interactional context.

Compensation came to mean learning how to set limits on an oral text by eliminating certain alternatives on syntactic, semantic or pragmatic grounds. This, in turn, made it easier for learners to perceive individual words. It meant learning to circumvent syntactic difficulties by anticipating and guessing, and then confirming hypotheses. It meant ruling out ambiguities and incorrect interpretations. It meant, in sum, attaining a higher level of *listening competence*.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSION :

This experiment was first carried out during a 12-week intensive course in the summer of 1982. Though 7 out of 9 students did pass the proficiency tests and were admitted to the college, it is difficult to attribute this success purely to the technique, since the students had also received additional training in the form of practice comprehension exercises modelled after those in the tests.

A more clear-cut result, however, was the manifestation of a kind of self-monitoring, self-correcting reflex in listening, where learners often repeated their " hearings " of something aloud, realized that these initial " hearings " were impossible, and continued the construction process until a reasonable interpretation was obtained and confirmed. It can be said that this technique worked against avoidance, encouraged the development of compensation strategies, reinforced the construction reflex, and improved the learners' judgment and hypothesis formation. Moreover, one side effect of the use of detailed listening comprehension was that by demonstrating the redundancy of language, learners finally understood that they did not need to understand every single word of an oral text.

[4] Activities for language production focussing on the development of preventive compensation strategies (by acting on self and others) and on the development of therapeutic compensation strategies (repair) as set forth by Harding-Esch (1980), had already been introduced to the class. See C. HENNER STANCHINA (1980).

Finally, this technique provided an opportunity to review grammar, taking up each particular problem within its specific context, dealing with each as it arose. This repetitive, cyclical exposure to grammar was perhaps more beneficial to intermediate and advanced learners than strict adherence to an abstract grammatical progression would have been. It seemed to allow for a gradual re-structuring of ther knowledge, and to promote the continuing evolution of their internal representations of the language.

Two observations of a more negative nature :

— A focus on the analysis of student errors is potentially problematic, if a proper atmosphere of mutual trust and solidarity does not prevail in the classroom.

— The technique described here, which is still being experimented, is one that students have never been exposed to before. Used to frontal teaching and grammatical progressions, students are often imbued with the idea that learning a language means completing all the exercises in the textbook. In a sense, the students themselves have become passive participants waiting to absorb the language, as if it were, in fact, possible to do so without suffering the stress and strain of thinking.

" When are we going to study grammar ? ", a remark made by a student early in the semester, is indicative of the problems a teacher faces in trying to change the image of language learning which students bring with them to the classroom.

The proponents of the autonomous learning philosophy have always emphasized its dual nature ; that is :

— learning a language and

— learning to learn a language.

The shift of responsibility for learning from teacher to learner implies a re-education of the learner. This is not without problems and setbacks for the teacher, especially in an academic setting where the immediate concern is the examination and where, at least temporarily, autonomy seems to the students to have little market value. One way of counteracting this is to confront the students with the kinds of listening situations in which they will have to function once enrolled in the university so that they themselves may evaluate their competence.

NOTES ON TAPES :

" Cafeteria Food " - WNYC, National Public Radio, June 6, 1982.

" Advice on Majoring in Computer Technology " - WOR Radio, Bernard Meltzer, June 6, 1982.

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